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THE PHANTOM COMICS AND THE NEW LEFT

A Socialist Superhero

Robert Aman

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Palgrave Studies in Comics and Graphic Novels
ISBN 978-3-030-39799-9 ISBN 978-3-030-39800-2 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-39800-2>

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This Palgrave Pivot imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

PREFACE

To this day, just to the right of the brown and orange striped couch, there is still a white door leading to the garret on Trädgårdsvägen in Vadstena, a quaint town in southern Sweden. It was behind this pale door in my grandparents' house that I, like the Pevensie siblings entering the wardrobe gateway to Narnia, made my first discoveries of the world of comics. My uncles had since long moved out and left behind what was, in my eyes, an invaluable treasure in the form of comic books and albums, reflecting the dominant tastes of children growing up during the seventies and eighties in Sweden. Behind the door to the dimly lit garret, where an adult could not stand upright—which, in my mind, confirmed the feeling of entering a zone intended for children—Tintin, Blueberry and Corto Maltese awaited with their many thrilling adventures. However, the finest prize was something entirely different: bundles of *The Phantom* comic books. The fact that these comics were printed in black and white (like many readers of my own generation or older, the decision to start printing the Swedish *The Phantom* comic in color is 1991 is still considered questionable) only added layers of mystique to the adventures and the exotic environments around the world where various members of the Phantom dynasty have righted wrongs throughout history. There was something about the character that spoke to my young sensibility in a way that other members of the same guild—Spider-Man, Superman, or Batman—were unable to. Both DC Comics' and Marvel's stables of heroes were visually

thrilling, with pages in color that added a sense of luxury, but the stories never captured my imagination in quite the same way as the Phantom did.

His lack of superpowers may have played a part in this, making him come across as more human and relatable, but there was something else in his essence that made me, like so many others who grew up in Sweden during the 1970s, and 1980s, wholeheartedly embrace the adventures of the Ghost Who Walks. As well as being relatable, the Phantom was comprehensive and recognizable in his way of reasoning, and in his ethical and moral stance between right and wrong which made him somewhat unique. In many ways, he came across as a living history text book where he, the twenty-first generation, or any of his ancestors always seemed to have a certain knack for getting caught up in conflicts familiar from history class, newspaper articles, or just outside our windows. And like us school children, his favorite drink was milk.

In a newspaper article to commemorate the Phantom's 65th year in the Swedish domain, journalist Pär Wirtén defines the American-made crime fighter as a "Swedish superhero," noting that there is no other place in the world where the Phantom is as loved as in Sweden. In an attempt to pinpoint the actual reasons for this, Wirtén identifies something familiar about the Phantom as if he lives in our political reflexes, mirroring the public landscape around us.¹ This is a book about these political reflexes, which seeks to answer the question of how an American superhero series about the descendent of an English aristocrat living in the African jungle started to reflect values that made him familiar to people in a Nordic country that is often far from the scene of the masked hero's many adventures, becoming a commercial success unrivalled by any other superhero in this part of the world in the process. This is done by considering the relationship between comic book fantasy and radical politics in modern Sweden from 1968 and throughout the seventies. During this period, *The Phantom* not only became Swedish in terms of political ideals but also emerged as the most socially conscious superhero comic.

In order to write this book, I am indebted to Ulf Granberg, iconic editor-in-chief of the Swedish *The Phantom* comic book, and Magnus Knutsson, writer of many of the most renowned adventures produced out of Stockholm, who both kindly invited me to their homes and generously shared their lives and times with the Phantom. While only a handful of their statements are included in the book, their insights have been invaluable in order to carry the project forward. Andreas Eriksson's encyclopedic knowledge of anything and everything in the Phantom universe

has been an invaluable source of information. I am also grateful to Mikael Sol, current editor-in-chief of *The Phantom*, for granting permission to republish panels from the comics discussed in the book.

The Phantom Comics and the New Left: A Socialist Superhero is the end product of a project that I embarked on as part of my previous employment at the University of Glasgow's School of Education, continuing through my current position at the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Learning at Linköping University. I want to express my appreciation to Michele Schweisfurth and Andreas Fejes for their continuous support. I also want to thank Roger Sabin, editor of this series, for his interest in the project and his generous encouragement in transforming it into a book. Finally, Mirja Kalms, a constant source of inspiration, has graciously refrained from complaining too loudly every time another large box of comics marked "research material" moves into our apartment.

* * *

Portions of this book have been published elsewhere. Chapter 2 is a revised version of the article "When The Phantom Became an Anticolonialist: Socialist Ideology, Swedish Exceptionalism, and the Embodiment of Foreign Policy" in *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, and Chapter 3 is a revised version of "The Phantom fights Apartheid: New Left Ideology, Solidarity Movements and the Politics of Race" in *Inks: Journal of the Comics Studies Society*. For permission to republish, I thank the editors, journals and presses.

Linköping, Sweden

Robert Aman

NOTE

1. *Sydsvenskan*, June 25, 2015.

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
2	White Ghost's Burden and Colonial Adventures	23
3	International Solidarity and Swedish Foreign Policy	53
4	Apartheid and Antiracism	77
5	The Women's Movements and Gender Politics	99
6	Conclusion: When the Phantom Became Swedish	125
	Index	133

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1.1	Phantom and Diana finally tie the knot in 1977 before the President of Bangalla (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	3
Fig. 1.2	Background to the Phantom saga (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	6
Fig. 2.1	After losing the presidential election to Dr. Luaga, General Bababu starts a civil war (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	27
Fig. 2.2	Ghost Who Walks instructs the bloodthirsty chiefs of the jungle that General Bababu will have a fair trial (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	28
Fig. 2.3	Racist caricatures of Japanese soldiers and the Phantom's summary of what distinguishes the "free" men from others (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	30
Fig. 2.4	Phantom justifies his killing of a Japanese officer (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	32
Fig. 2.5	White stranger benevolently promises to help the Bandars (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	34
Fig. 2.6	Walker is tied to an altar beneath a demon idol of a familiar figure (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	35
Fig. 2.7	Bandars plead to Walker to lead them in battle (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	36
Fig. 2.8	Columbus initiates the conquest of the Americas by claiming the land in the name of the Spanish court, <i>Los Reyes Católicos</i> (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	38

Fig. 2.9	Walker informs Columbus that he wishes to remain as the Phantom lists the cargo on board the ship returning to Spain (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	39
Fig. 2.10	Caribo about to be ritually sacrificed before young Walker comes to the rescue (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	40
Fig. 2.11	Corridors of Mayas worshiping Walker's blond presence, as the two friends make their escape (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	42
Fig. 2.12	Phantom explains to his wife that Cortés eventually found the gold that Walker and Caribo searched for in vain (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	43
Fig. 2.13	Falk/Barry's original: "There was much gold there! Cortéz would find it 25 years later" (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	46
Fig. 2.14	Swedish version: "Cortez plundered the city 25 years later... and in a certain sense it was fortunate that Kit wasn't involved in that story..." (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	47
Fig. 2.15	Falk/Barry's original: Diana expresses her amazement at her husband's ancestor's presence on Columbus' ship (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	48
Fig. 2.16	Swedish version: Diana lashes out against the consequences of European colonialism (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	48
Fig. 3.1	Mbebo teaches the Phantom about racial exploitation in Bangalla prior to the country gained independence (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	57
Fig. 3.2	The Phantom declares to the Minister of Agriculture that the plantation should be owned collectively by the former slaves (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	59
Fig. 3.3	The Phantom forces Minister Stevens to sell the plantation to the state of Bangalla (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	61
Fig. 3.4	Toro being duped by the white store owners, taking advantage of the fact that Toro can't read or count (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	62
Fig. 3.5	The Phantom introduces Trader Joe and informs the peasants that the old merchant will teach them the logics of a co-operative society and profit distribution (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	63
Fig. 3.6	The co-operative store blossoms again after all peasants have realized that they need to jointly take responsibility for the store (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	66

Fig. 3.7	During the car ride, the General informs his daughter that the British sought to introduce law and civilization in the principality (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	69
Fig. 3.8	The Phantom rebukes General Williams who says that he wanted to show his daughter those places where he had fought gloriously (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	70
Fig. 3.9	The Phantom informing Nora that the best way to thank him is by telling the truth about the violence Britain enacted on the local population (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	71
Fig. 4.1	The Phantom locates the source of the pollution of the river (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	80
Fig. 4.2	The police brutally beating a black man next to a bench carrying a “for whites only” sign (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	81
Fig. 4.3	The Phantom informing the guerrilla that they can consider the weapon as a gift from Bangalla (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	82
Fig. 4.4	A new shipment of workers arrives at the iron mine in Rodia (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	86
Fig. 4.5	The Phantom introduces himself to the guerrilla leader (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	87
Fig. 4.6	The Phantom and the Rodian Liberation Army ready for battle (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	88
Fig. 4.7	Colonel X thanks the Phantom for his contribution to their revolutionary struggle (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	90
Fig. 4.8	The Phantom discovers a wedding photo of the black Abraham and the white Sara, and immediately sets off for Rodia to bring Sara back (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	92
Fig. 4.9	Abraham and Sara are finally united under the auspices of the Phantom (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	94
Fig. 5.1	The Sky Band are mesmerized by the masked stranger’s charming ways (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	101
Fig. 5.2	Myrna complaining to her subordinated Governor husband (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	104
Fig. 5.3	Myrna in tears lamenting her treatment of her devoted husband (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	106
Fig. 5.4	Myrna informing her husband that he can sit and relax as she’ll bring his pipe and then cook dinner (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	107

Fig. 5.5	A male chauvinist explains that it is only natural for his to make decisions while women have more unaggressive qualities, before a woman interrupts explaining that it's merely a question of upbringing (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	113
Fig. 5.6	Diana excels in all the tests—especially the physical ones (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	113
Fig. 5.7	Diana having to fend off another of her countless admirers (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	115
Fig. 5.8	With the Phantom unconscious, Diana beats the villains on her own (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	116
Fig. 5.9	Diana's body on display as part of her medical examination (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	117
Fig. 5.10	Princess Sin in an attempt to seduce the Phantom (© King Features Syndicate Inc.)	118



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract This chapter introduces the Phantom, his backstory, and publication history in different parts of the world. The chapter continues by introducing the main argument of the book that the Phantom, a product of American mass culture, was refashioned to meet the interests and demands of a Swedish audience. Some of the most active contributors to the series in recent decades have been the Sweden-based creators known as Team Fantomen. Team Fantomen became an international publication node in *The Phantom* franchise in 1972 when they set up their official production of licensed scripts which enabled them to redefine the character, accused of both racism and sexism, in line with the progressive Left-wing politics which dominated Swedish politics and public discourse throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

Keywords The Phantom · New Left · Lee Falk · Superhero comics · Ideology · Socialism

On Wednesday August 27, 1986, a larger crowd than usual had paid the entrance fee at Parken Zoo in the Swedish town of Eskilstuna. This time the public was not there to visit the zoo's white tigers—the park's main marketing focus—but to witness Lee Falk (1911–1991), creator

of *The Phantom*, officially opening the zoo's latest attraction: *Fantomenland* (*Phantom Land*). "Fantastic. Wonderful. Amazing," were the spontaneous comments picked up by a journalist from the local daily, *Folket*, accompanying Falk around as he inspected the amusement park devoted to his creation. Although an industrial city located outside Stockholm may seem a long way from the exotic jungle environment where the Phantom resides on the comic pages, visitors could enter his home in the ancient Skull Cave, sit on the Skull Throne, inspect the cave's vast treasure trove, roam around a scaled-down replica of a jungle village and, of course, meet and greet the Phantom himself in person. In a later interview with *Princeton Arts*, Falk expressed both joy and astonishment at the global spread and apparent commercial appeal of his character, referring to the theme park as a "modest version of Disneyland."¹

The Phantom, an adventure series set in the fictional African nation-state of Bangalla, debuted as a daily strip in 1936, making him a pioneer in the superhero genre. Despite his mythical name, however, the Phantom is an ordinary man without the mutant powers often associated with superheroes—from Superman and Green Lantern to Wonder Woman and Aquaman—that rose to fandom around the same period—times that are often referred to retrospectively as the "Golden Age of comics." Although he displays most of the essential characteristics included in definitions of a superhero in recent scholarly work—"enemies, a strong moral code, a secret identity, a costume" (McLain 2009, 1; cf. Coogan 2006; Reynolds 1992)—the Phantom makes up for his lack of extraordinary powers with ingenuity, skill and integrity as he faces everything the criminal world can throw at him. In theory, his abilities are such as any reader could achieve with the right dedication and training. In contrast to most readers, however, the Phantom rights, wrongs and combats evil in all its forms in the dense jungle he calls home ("the Deep Woods") as well as in every corner of the world.

Despite being a lone ranger and subsequently working almost exclusively alone—whether battling pirates on the African coast, taking on organized crime in Italy or resolving a kidnapping drama in Mexico—the Phantom can count on the infinite support of several key characters. A constant companion is Devil, his faithful gray mountain wolf, often mistaken for a dog by others to which the Phantom readily replies: "He's not a dog, he's a wolf." Having developed an understanding only rivaled in comic books by that between Tintin and Snowy, Devil understands almost everything the Phantom tells him and does not shy away from showing